

Bruce Springsteen and the Wailers Max's Kansas City, July 18, 1973*

© Lorraine O'Grady

A piece written by O'Grady in 1973 for the Village Voice, but rejected by her editor because it was "too soon for these two" and finally published in 2010, reviews the night the Wailers with Bob Marley led in for Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band.

Upstairs at Max's Kansas City is packed. Tonight the tiny showcase room that seats 40 is crammed with 50 record execs and press wanting to hear for themselves the buzz from *Asbury Park*, Bruce Springsteen's first album. The smoky air is electric when the lead-in act begins: they are the Wailers, a Jamaican reggae group being seen for the first time in the States. Though the audience may be curious about this new island music, the charge here is for Bruce.

Springsteen is getting famous. "At least," he says, "that's what my manager tells me."

And why not? He's the real thing. An authentic talent, with a rushing stream-of-conscious imagery that is banked by a solid rock-and-roll-rhythm-and-blues beat. At times the imagery becomes less of a stream and more of a torrent. It's enough to make a Freudian analyst rub his hands in glee.

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* Written for the Village Voice, but rejected with an editorial note that it was "too soon for these two," the review was first published in 2010 as "A Review of Max's," in: Steven Kasher, editor, *Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll*. Contributions by: Lou Reed, Lenny Kaye, Danny Fields, Lorraine O'Grady, and Steven Watson. Abrams Image, New York, 2010, p. 106.

boardwalk's circus-carnival, fitting enough for an artist from Asbury Park, New Jersey.

But star-making is a gruelling process. When the band came on, Springsteen looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks. The first set was tired and listless. Still, no one in this audience was about to leave. By the second set, the band's mood had change to tired but happy, with playing so loose and easy I felt as if I'd wandered into a practice room accidentally.

Springsteen and his band are in transition and, like so many groups about to make it big, the sound is being temporarily affected. Their small, inexpensive equipment has been turned in for larger amps, more suited to the concert hall than to the intimacy of the small club. Eventually it won't matter. This is probably one of their last trips to Max's Kansas City.

Last night, the acoustic songs worked best. The carefully orchestrated, line to line mood-changes in "Circus Song," from pathos to gaiety, were amazing. If you can picture Todd Brown's *Freaks* laced with gentleness, then you have an idea of what I mean. By the time Bruce introduced a new number, "Zero and Terry," as being "sort of a West Side Story," the band was on electric and I had to take his word for it. I couldn't hear a thing.

The people at his record company, Columbia, are pretty excited. "Another Dylan," they keep saying. But they may be speaking more commercially than artistically. It's hard to imagine Bruce spawning a host of imitators. Hard even to imagine anyone else singing his songs, they're such an intimate reflection of his psyche. Not that this is an adverse criticism, or even a prediction of future popularity. But in the dialogue started by Dylan, Springsteen feels more like a closing statement than a new opening. I can't see pop music becoming pure poetry.

The Wailers, who record for Island Records, would have made a better lead-in to Dylan's message-oriented fantasies than to the free associations of Springsteen. Reggae is rooted in the calypso tradition of political commentary. But in reggae we have rounded a bend, from innuendo to polemic. Too bad. The sly ingenuousness of calypsonians like the Duke of Iron and Lord

Kitchener may be gone forever, replaced by today's thing: black power.

But it's complicated. When the Wailer's sing, "We're burning and looting tonight . . . We're burning all illusion," it's hard to connect the message to the monotonous beat. Reggae is ganja as much as politics; you can get high just dancing to it. Moving slowly and repetitiously, you feel your head leave your body. But Americans may be too keyed up to sway like somnambulists. And Upstairs at Max's Kansas City, there's scarcely an inch between tables.

Whether the quaalude set latches on or not, the Wailers are a tight group, and their lead singer Bob Marley, a small denim-clad man holding a big acoustic guitar, looks like a half-crazed Rastafarian out of the hills. He sings in the Afro-Caribbean's haunting semi-falsetto. Marley wrote "Stir It Up" and "Guava Jelly" for Johnny Nash, for those who need further introduction.

A Review of Max's

LORRAINE O'GRADY

The following concert review was written for the Village Voice following a show on July 18, 1973. The piece was rejected. The editor wasn't sure if either act would ever make it.

Upstairs at Max's Kansas City is packed. Tonight the tiny showcase room that seats forty is crammed with fifty record execs and press wanting to hear for themselves the buzz from *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, Bruce Springsteen's first album. The smoky air is electric when the lead-in act begins: They are the Wailers, a Jamaican reggae group being seen for the first time in the States. Though the audience may be curious about this new island music, the charge here is for Bruce.

Springsteen is getting famous. "At least," he says, "that's what my manager tells me."

And why not? He's the real thing. An authentic talent, with a rushing stream-of-consciousness imagery backed by a solid rock-and-roll, rhythm-and-blues beat. At times the imagery becomes less of a stream and more of a torrent. It's enough to make a Freudian analyst rub his hands in glee.

In lyrics that are among the most beautiful and complex in rock today, Springsteen takes his audience on a tender odyssey through the landscapes of a decaying city, with side trips to a boardwalk's circus carnival—fitting enough for an artist from Asbury Park, New Jersey.

But star-making is a grueling process. When the band came on, Springsteen looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks. The first set was tired and listless. Still, no one in this audience was about to leave. By the second set, the band's mood had changed to tired but happy, with playing so loose and easy I felt as if I'd wandered into a practice room accidentally.

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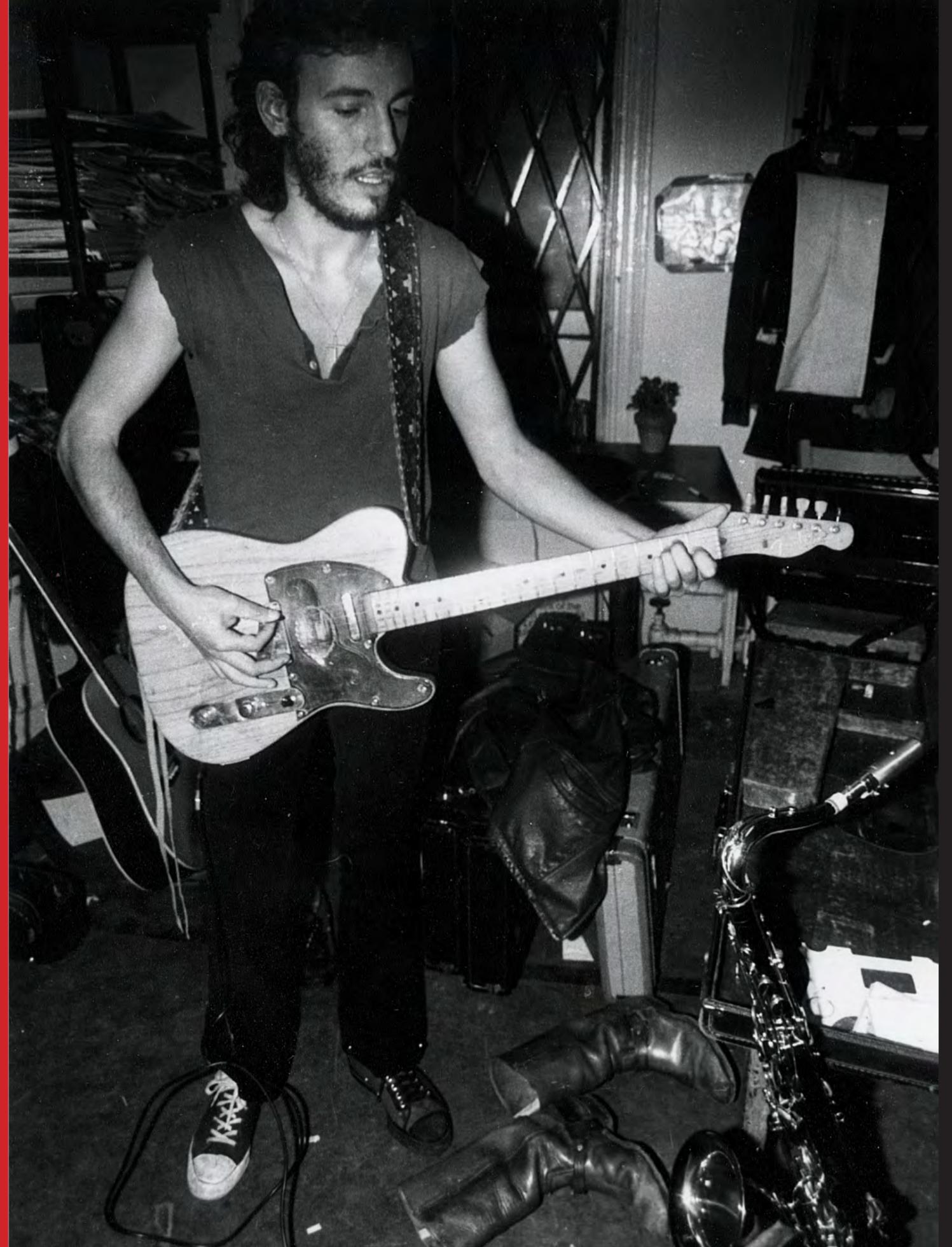
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OPPOSITE PAGE **Bruce Springsteen,**
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